

Paint the Sky by Coneflower Adams

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Summary: 12 years Eleven was surrounded by white walls. White doesn't surround her any longer.

Paint the Sky

White walls. They surrounded her for 12 years like a bland cocoon she was trapped inside. Outside of that white prison she discovered the palette that she'd been cruelly deprived of her entire life.

A mass of colors, almost overwhelming, were all around her. The warm oranges and browns that made up Mike's basement. The tri-color of Dustin's hat. The pale yellow of the grass. The soft pink of her dress. The brilliant blue of the sky. Eleven could hardly take it all in.

It was official. She and Hopper would live in a quaint red brick house the next street over from Mike's street. She was relieved that they'd live so close to her friends, instead of the secluded cabin she'd lived in for nearly two years.

When Mike asked her what color she wanted to paint her new room, because the lifeless white was too frighteningly similar to her past, El had to ponder over the decision. "What color do you like?" she asked Mike as they checked out her new room.

Mike shrugged. "Blue and red are my favorite colors."

"I like blue." She touched the wall, imagining the color of the sky splashed onto the drywall. "It's nice."

"What's your favorite color, El?"

El paused. She'd never had a favorite color; never knew there was a rainbow of possibilities out there. She didn't need to think hard on the subject. "Yellow. Like the sun." She glided fingertips along the wall, imagining a trail of yellow painted where the pads of her digits touched.

"That's cool." Mike joined her in front of the wall, drawing a broad circle with his index finger then short lines fanning out from it.

She recognized the depiction. El smiled, a tiny giggle escaping at the invisible sun Mike drew on her wall. He glanced over at her with that

bashful grin of his.

"Do you think Hopper will let me have two colors?" she asked, carefully, already feeling as if she'd asked for too much.

"I'm sure he'd be fine with that. What two colors?"

"Blue and yellow."

Mike was the sky to her. His presence surrounded her, comforting and reliable. The sky was always there, and he'd always be there for her. El was the sun in his sky. The sun represented freedom in her eyes. The sun shined on no matter how cloudy the day became, and that's exactly how El felt these days.

Mike was right. Hopper didn't have a problem with the two different colors, though he did raise his eyebrows at the request. The boys joined El in helping paint her bedroom. Between the five of them, the job went fairly quickly; that is when Dustin and Lucas weren't slapping each other with the paintbrushes, much to both their Moms' chagrin when they returned home.

Her bedroom furniture didn't match, just pieced together like a yard sale conglomeration, but El loved it. Every piece of furniture was unique in her eyes. Her whole life, everything around her was uniform and sterile, but this mismatch group of things made her happy. In a way, her bedroom furniture mirrored her friends. They were all sort of mismatched and unique, but fit together just right.

It made the room a bit cramped, but Hopper managed to fit a loveseat in there. There was a certain comfort she felt whenever she sat on the couch in Mike's basement and wanted the same for her own little space. That's where she was currently sitting with Will, the other boys on the floor leaning their backs against her bed.

"Is it time to give El her presents yet?" Dustin looked at the other guys excitedly.

El gave them a bewildered look. "Presents?"

Lucas shrugged. "Just some stuff we wanna give you for your new room."

He and Dustin got up to retrieve a large box from the hallway. "I'm going first!" Dustin proclaimed as he dove in the cardboard box to remove a smaller box. He set it between El and Will. "I got you your own secret stash of snacks. All the good stuff too." He pointed to the food items. "Trail mix, pop rocks, smarties, chee wees, a few twinkies, and the coveted," he held up a chocolate-covered treat wrapped in a plastic baggie, cradling it to his cheek, "ding-dong."

"Stop oogling the ding dong, ding dong. It's my turn!" Lucas shoved Dustin out the way. He presented to El a supercom. "My dad had an old supercom in our garage. He kinda tweaked it so it'd work as good as the ones me and Mike have." He handed her the com system, and El accepted it gladly. Not only did she live close to two of her best friends, but now she could communicate with them any time.

"I wanna be the first person you test it on," Lucas added.

El smiled, gratefully. "You will." She was glad their relationship had curved a one-eighty since that first week after they'd met.

Will was next. He handed her a folded flannel blanket. "My mom made this for you. She wanted to make sure you were warm enough at night."

El caressed the material to her cheek. The blanket was incredibly soft, and she looked forward to cuddling into it on cold nights. El set the blanket on her lap as Will handed her a piece of paper.

The drawing on the thick sketchbook paper was of a person adorned in a pink robe. Blue lines shot out of the person's raised hand at an unseen foe off the paper. El looked closer at the robed figure. "Is that me?"

"Yeah!" Will replied enthusiastically. He pointed at the drawing. "The guys said you were like a wizard whenever you used your powers, so I draw you wearing a wizard robe while defeating the Demogorgon." His voice dropped at the last word. Everyone knew Will had a hard time talking about the monster that had trapped him in the Upside Down.

El grasped his hand, giving it a comforting squeeze. No one had ever

given her something so thoughtful. "It's nice, Will. Really nice."

Will leaned across the loveseat, pulling her into a hug. In the two months they'd gotten to know each other, they'd become just as close as she was with the rest of the boys. Secretly, El even thought of Will like a brother. They shared a connection that she didn't quite understand, but was thankful that it existed.

"Group hug!" Dustin yelled, and the rest of the boys made a dog pile around them.

"Okay, I'm getting out of here before it gets weird," Lucas said, abandoning the pile first. They all laughed and untangled from the group.

"It's your turn, Mike," Dustin pointed out, and all eyes fell on Mike.

The poor boy looked like he wanted to sink into the ground. He rubbed the back of his neck, cheeks flaring at his confession. "I kinda like to give El her present alone."

Dustin and Lucas faced each other with their mouths open in feigned shock, which made Mike turn even redder. "We'll leave you two lovebirds," Dustin quirked, slapping him on the shoulder.

"It's not like that, Dustin!" Mike protested, slapping him back.

Dustin and Lucas walked out, throwing more teases Mike's way as they left. Will hugged El one more time and gave Mike a reassuring smile before following.

"Why the presents?" El asked, filling up the silence that was left by the absence of their friends. She'd received these types of things before. Papa would bring her small tokens if she'd pleased him, or every time he wanted her to bring her powers to a higher level. When she didn't exceed his expectations, one of her meager possessions would be taken away.

Her friends weren't like Papa. They never asked her to use her powers for their own benefits, and she trusted them that they would never use her in that way. They'd risked their lives to protect her so many times; how could she not trust them?

"Well, this is your first real home," Mike explained. El felt a twinge at the word home. She'd thought of Mike's basement as home for so long; this new place would take a while to accept. "And we wanted to kinda give you some housewarming gifts." His face scrunched up. "That sounded way too cheesy."

El touched his arm, and Mike met her gaze, bashfully. "I'm really grateful, Mike. To you and the guys." Somehow they found their hands intertwined, and both felt the loveseat calling their names.

"I haven't given you my present yet." El watched curiously as Mike slid the cardboard box over. Before he revealed his gift, Mike said, "Close your eyes."

El threw him a confused look, but complied. She felt something square placed on her lap. She opened her eyes and gasped quietly. A music box sat on her legs. She recognized exactly what it was, having seen one in Nancy's bedroom several times. An old-fashioned flower print covered the pale pink box. El tipped the lid to find a ballerina spinning to a gentle, tinging tune.

She felt Mike's eyes penetrating her as she remained silent and stared at the music box. He was waiting for a response and she knew her silence would probably keep him antsy.

"It's beautiful," El mustered to say, the onslaught of all the generosity overflowing her heart.

Mike breathed in relief, a bright smile splitting his face. "I know you liked Nancy's music box, so thought you might want one of your own. Nancy kinda helped me pick it out."

El pressed a kiss to Mike's freckled cheek, his skin warm against her lips, and she caught a full-blown blush painted across his face when she pulled away. She pushed off the loveseat, carrying the music box to set on her nightstand.

Later, after a little bit of cuddling with Mike on the loveseat, El would do a little decorating. She'd hang Will's drawing on the wall beside her bed, stand Lucas's supercom next to Mike's music box, and stash Dustin's snack box underneath her bed. Then she'd curl up on

her loveseat in the blanket Ms. Byer's made taking in her new bedroom, a home to call her own, and a life that had just begun.